

MICHAEL MELANIPHY ON THE NON-LEAGUE SCENE

LEE INJECTS HONESTY INTO THE CUP

● Honesty may not be the first thought that comes to mind when modern soccer is under analysis, but the man who made the most honest impact in the FA Cup this season was undoubtedly Brian Lee, the straight-talking manager of Wycombe Wanderers (right).

In an era of prima donna players, under-the-counter deals, and broken contracts, his crisp comments on football in general and the prospects of Wycombe against Middlesborough in the Cup in particular were like a breath of fresh air.

He talked, you might say, in straight lines. No hedging, no half-truths, just sincerely held views on the game which commands a part-time place in the crowded life of a man who is also director of the Bisham Abbey National Sports Centre and a Justice of the Peace.

Lee has long been one of the most articulate and talented managers in the Rothmans Isthmian League, but the national Press, television and radio did not awaken to the fact until Wycombe unexpectedly beat Bournemouth, joint-leaders of the First Division, in the Cup third round.

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When asked to assess his team's chances against Jack Charlton's men, Lee ventured the now famous opinion: "We have no chance whatsoever." Managers in Cup week are not supposed to talk like that, so he was promptly hailed as a phenomenon.

From the baronial splendour of Bisham Abbey, Lee delighted and surprised journalists more accustomed to the double-talk of many League managers.

Here's an example from Jeff Powell in the *Daily Mail*: "Look at the League managers. The majority of them are cheating. The genuine ones are making them-

selves ill with worry about being let down on the pitch by the prima donnas they call professional footballers.

"It makes me laugh when I hear them complaining about playing 60 games a season. Our lads at Wycombe played 86 matches last season, and loved every minute."

John Sadler of the *Sun* quoted Lee on the different attitude of amateur and professionals. "To become an amateur player at our level they have to sacrifice a lot of personal life. We have a minimum time to prepare and we use it. Professionals have the maximum time — and misuse it. We have an appetite for the game that a few pros should copy. But how can they develop an appetite when the money is already in the bank."

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After blunt and brave words like these, many wondered if Wycombe could make anything like the same impressive impact against Middlesborough when the talking stopped and the action began. Lee's eve-of-battle exhortation to his players was: "Play for your pride, don't give Middlesborough anything they don't deserve and keep the score honourable."

Well, Wycombe certainly did all that Lee asked of them. They nearly ended Middlesborough's Cup aspirations with a superb display of skill and attacking football in a 0-0 draw at Loakes Park, a sloping pitch in the foothills of the Chilterns. Middlesborough duly won the replay, but only 1-0 with a goal in the 89th minute.

Millions of TV viewers saw the talented team that Lee has moulded when they were featured in 'The Big Match'. Many must have realised for the first time that amateur soccer at the top level is slicker and better drilled than you find at some outposts in the lower



divisions of the Football League.

Leatherhead's Cup triumph at Brighton added more laurels to the Isthmian League, while Wimbledon's part-time professionals struck an almighty blow for the prestige of non-League football in general by winning their third round tie at Burnley. Lee's comments about the attitude and dedication of players who combine football with a job outside the game were seen to be true.

Soccer, to Lee, is as much to do with character as skill, which is why his team won the Isthmian League championship three times in the last four seasons. He said:

"All successful teams have character; that is a self-determination and discipline, a willingness to help other players, to work together by sharing the chasing of loose balls, winning 50-50 situations and encouraging players who have made mistakes."

Lee bristles with ideas on football and is a persuasive advocate of many reforms. One example is his attitude to punishment for players who persistently commit fouls. He would like to see the introduction of a system in which when a player is booked by the referee he should leave the field, possibly for the remainder of the game.

Lee said: "If a player commits a foul against Wycombe, it's of no advantage to us for that player to be booked and possibly miss games (if he has been booked twice previously) with Hendon and Enfield, who might be challenging for the championship."

It is typical of Lee's honest attitude that he rates Tommy Lawrence of Enfield as the best manager in amateur soccer, even though his own record is outstanding. He may be right, but as an ambassador for the amateur game, Lee is in a class of his own.

Followers of Wycombe's fortunes since Lee became manager in 1968 may be interested in his choice of the best combined team drawn from players who have been at Loakes Park during his reign. It is: John Maskell, Paul Fuschillo, Derek Gamblin, Peter Suddaby, John Delaney, Ted Powell, Larry Pritchard, Mike Holifield, Ken Swain, Tony Horseman, Steve Perrin. Sub: Ian Rundie.

Beat that!